



Marianna Trevino Wright

Executive Director

Written Testimony

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Democratic Issues Forum

“Between the River & The Wall:

Wild Creatures and Features on the Chopping Block”

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Dear Chairman Grijalva and Members of the Committee:

My Name is Marianna Trevino Wright. I am the executive director of the National Butterfly Center in Mission, Texas, which is privately owned and operated for our members and guests by the non-profit North American Butterfly Association. This 100-acre property is ‘ground zero’ for the first new section of border wall funded in a decade.

On July 20, 2017—nine months before a Congressional vote funded more border wall—I found contractors on our land cutting down trees, mowing down brush and widening a road ahead of this project.¹ The five workmen and their supervisor, employees of TIKIGAQ Construction, an Alaskan contractor, explained they had been sent by the government.

Not only had we received no notice, but Border Patrol and Customs & Border Protection both initially denied their roles in what happened.

Since thirty-three (33) new miles of border wall were funded in March of 2018, we have struggled to communicate the seriousness of the threat to people, wildlife and natural resources to the public, as members of the media and Congress have argued there is no new border wall funding, only “levee system improvements.” This assertion is false.

Unfortunately, this deceit is directly related to a scheme to exploit the easement for flood control across private property by calling border walls “levee walls” and “levee fences.”

1 <https://www.texasobserver.org/national-butterfly-center-staff-surprised-by-workers-with-chainsaws-prepping-trumps-border-wall/>

If the walls and fences had anything to do with flood control, the government could build them in the existing levee easement and would not have to exercise eminent domain to acquire private property for their construction, as the courts have ruled they must.

This false term remains in use and warrants clarification, so our Congressional representatives are not fooled into voting to fund such barriers, as they were in 2018.

While we have not been told exactly where construction will begin for the six (6) miles of new border wall founded in the March 2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act,² the contract³ was awarded to SLSCO on Oct. 31, 2018, for \$145 million; that's \$24.17 million/mile. To date, the land survey, "environmental" and "archeological" surveys, and appraisal of our property have all been completed.

On December 18, 2018, we met with eight (8) representatives of Border Patrol, Customs & Border Protection and the Department of Homeland Security who are working with the Office of Border Wall Management to build the wall across our property and adjacent lands. They stated we should expect construction to begin late February or early March of this year. This means the bulldozers will roll into the North American Butterfly Association Section of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Wildlife Conservation Corridor, eliminating thousands of trees, during spring nesting season for hundreds of species of migratory raptors and songbirds; hence, the necessity for the waiver of the duly passed Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which is designed to protect these species throughout their lifecycle—species fundamental to healthy ecosystems across North and South America.⁴

In fact, twenty-eight (28) federal laws have been waived for the construction of new border wall that will destroy much of the little native habitat remaining in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. According to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, approximately 5% of original vegetation remains here, in a region where endangered, threatened and protected species like the Ocelot, Jaguarundi, Texas Tortoise, Texas Horned Lizard, South Texas Siren, Texas Indigo and Peregrine Falcon struggle for survival.⁵

The Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the Clean Water Act are just a few of the laws waived that will negatively impact the wild creatures and features of South Texas, as well as our natural and cultural inheritance.

2 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1625/text>

3 <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/border-wall-construction-project-begin-texas>

4 <https://www.fws.gov/birds/policies-and-regulations/laws-legislations/migratory-bird-treaty-act.php>

5 https://tpwd.texas.gov/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_bk_w7000_0013.pdf

This construction project will take place along the Rio Grande River—the only source of freshwater for close to two (2) million people in Hidalgo and Cameron Counties—and the canal system that delivers freshwater to farms, ranches and water treatment facilities throughout our delta. In the wake of the nation's largest lettuce recall, it is difficult to understand why the government would deliberately waive laws designed to protect the water and food supply in this area, where ag-related business contributes more than \$7 billion, annually, to our economy.⁶

According to the Office of Border Wall Management, building the border wall here involves clearing all vegetation in the construction and “enforcement” zones; replacing our earthen levees with vertical concrete walls up to eighteen (18) feet; placing eighteen (18) foot-tall steel bollards on top; and creating a rubberized, all-weather road on the south side of the wall. We already know the border wall will exacerbate flooding⁷ and drown all terrestrial life trapped between the river and the wall. It will also increase erosion, make us vulnerable to actual land loss, and violate multiple international treaties with Mexico.⁸ Lastly, the proposed lighting, brilliant all-night lights atop twenty-two (22) foot high poles, spaced every one hundred-fifty (150) feet, will disrupt the crepuscular and nocturnal activities of all plants and animals, transforming what is now a vibrant, but endangered ecosystem, into a biological desert.

All-in-all, more than 11,000 acres of public greenspace and private property will wind up behind the border wall, which will be built over two (2) miles inland as the river winds. These lands, once split by a concrete and steel barrier more than thirty (30) feet tall, stripped bare of vegetation, and lit up at night, will provide a sliver of fragmented habitat for rare and remarkable insects, birds, reptiles and mammals found nowhere else in the country.

Wherever the land is cleared, vegetation that provides sensitive breeding and feeding areas for wildlife will disappear. Each species at risk has specific needs. Ocelots, for example, require dense, Tamaulipan Thornscrub, while butterflies require their host plant, without which they cannot reproduce. Each butterfly species is intimately tied to a couple of plant species their caterpillars can consume to complete their metamorphosis; so if you eliminate the plant from the landscape, you eliminate the butterfly.

At the National Butterfly Center (NBC), we have invested fifteen (15) years and almost \$10 million deliberately propagating and planting native grasses, shrubs and trees that sustain butterflies. More than 240 species of butterflies have been seen at the NBC and

6 <https://today.agrilife.org/2017/01/03/valley-agriculture-history/>

7 <https://www.scribd.com/document/41500057/Customs-and-Border-Protection-report-on-border-walls-crossing-washes-and-streams>

8 https://www.ibwc.gov/treaties_minutes/treaties.html

as many as 200,000 individual butterflies have been seen there in a single day. These butterflies are not caged, or restrained in any way, or brought to the NBC, they are there because we have created habitat for all of these species by planting large numbers of native plants upon which the butterflies depend. As a direct result, this best place in the United States for seeing wild butterflies and for learning about the importance of butterflies and their conservation.

In the process, we have built a dynamic center for environmental education and conservation and a vibrant tourist attraction. Along with our neighbor, Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, we receive more than 30,000 visitors each year from around the world—visitors who contribute close to \$500 million/year in eco-tourism to a region where more than 30% of the population lives at or below the federal poverty guideline.⁹

For more than six (6) years I have worked on this property, which runs all the way to the Rio Grande River. We are open seven (7) days/week to receive school children, outdoor enthusiasts, research scientists, community members and curiosity-seekers from every walk of life and every part of the world. We even host an annual “Sleep Over Under the Stars” event for the Girl Scouts of the USA, at a place many mistakenly believe to be dangerous and overrun by “bad hombres.” In 2014-2015, when Governor Perry deployed the Texas National Guard to the Texas-Mexico border, we had troops posted on the levee on our property. They had nothing to report, other than a great time at the holiday potluck we organized for all battalions between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

My husband and I have six (6) children we’ve reared on the border. It’s been a privilege and a joy to take them fishing and kayaking on the river, where I learned to waterski more than thirty (30) years ago. It’s been wonderful to take family and friends on night hikes to the river and sunset cruises with Father Roy Snipes. What a dream-come-true to lead members and guests through the woods to see their first Mexican Bluewing or observe their first Gray Hawk. All of this would be impossible if the crisis narrative were true.

At the National Butterfly Center, the Cornell University eBird list moderator conducts bird surveys, solo, three (3) times per month. She is not afraid of anything other than the needless murder of thousands of nestlings this spring.

At the National Butterfly Center, photographers and scientists from the American Museum of Natural History are cataloguing our native bees, including previously

⁹ <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/hidalgo-county-tx/>

unknown species, and calling us “a mecca for rare fauna—unusual butterflies, birds and now, it would seem, wild bees.”¹⁰

At the National Butterfly Center, we know the presence of people engaged in legitimate activity, all day, every day, is the greatest deterrent to illicit activity, and a border wall will push all of that away from the river, our actual border.

The great philosopher, Aristotle, postulated, “*horror vacui*,” or, “Nature abhors a vacuum.” Please do not allow this horror to proceed, to destroy thousands of acres of public and private lands; condemn thousands of wildlife species; poison our air and water; excavate the graves of our indigenous people; close our nature centers, historic landmarks, RV parks and businesses; eliminate our access to our lifeblood, the Rio Grande River, or create a barren ‘no man’s land’ behind an artificial barrier—a vacuum—into which the cartels, drugs and weapons may enter.

Preserve our quality of life, protect our natural treasures and provide for national security by funding technology and human resources, enacting comprehensive immigration reform, declaring a moratorium on the wall construction that has been funded in Hidalgo and Starr Counties, and proclaiming, “No more border wall. America is better than that.”

¹⁰ <https://www.wildbeestexas.com/introduction>